

RELEVANCE OF READING THE NOVEL – ‘THE NIGHT RIDER’ IN THE PRESENT CONTEXT

BHAGYASHREE D PATTANSHETTI

*Assistant Professor, Department of Studies in English,
Government First Grade College, Nesargi, Belagam, Karnataka, India*

ABSTRACT

The novel ‘The Night Rider’ is based on events that occurred in Kentucky between the years 1905 and 1908. The growers of dark tobacco in Kentucky and Tennessee formed a protective association to combat the tobacco companies and to try to force them to pay higher prices for tobacco. When the companies countered with small increases offered to all who would sell to them, some planters turned to violent action executed by bands of ‘night riders’. This included the destruction of the plant beds of those who refused to join the fight against the companies and finally led to the dynamiting of company warehouses in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. The action of the lawless bands was finally stopped by sending troops into the area. It is a story of self-realization that comes too late to a man who, though intelligent, lacks the will, moral strength, or clarity of vision to make the right decisions when faced with crises in his life.

KEYWORDS: ‘The Night Rider’, Kentucky and Tennessee

Received: Jun 25, 2016; **Accepted:** Jul 23, 2016; **Published:** Aug 12, 2016; **Paper Id.:** IJELAUG20166

INTRODUCTION

American literature became a significant and independent domain in the field of literary studies. It established its own identity as far as its use of theme, language, characters and style is concerned. Many American writers made their unique imprint through their works. Their unique ideas and thoughts on American dream, the land and frontier, multi-culture, pop culture, and community enriched the American literature. In this tradition and culture of American literature, the stature of Robert Penn Warren casts a long outstanding shadow on American literature.

RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

The present study is an attempt to analyze the novel from these shades of experience. It is pertinent to study this in the 21 century when no society can claim to be uninfluenced by the mechanised world. And the result is a global culture where rich and powerful, whether White, Black or Brown, take the centre stage and the rest fall in the periphery. One can foresee the 21 century world in the 20 century America and, hence, the relevance of the study.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In the era of globalisation and mechanisation man has excelled in many aspects but at the same time become rootless. A Sense of loss of identity and rootlessness, loss of moral values and ethics for greed persists in the society. There is a need to preserve our culture and strengthen our roots. In order to inculcate the moral values

and to build an ideal society, there is a need to study some excellent works of various authors. The main objective of the paper is to analyse the novel from these perspectives.

RESEARCH ON THE TOPIC

As far as the knowledge of the writer is concerned much research has been carried out on analyzing the novel as historical basis. Analysing the novel from the globalised and mechanised context where the human values stand in the periphery rather than central is a new aspect.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The focus is will be on the analysis of the primary sources in the light of relevant criticism on the novel. The emphasis will be made on critical interpretations. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the background or the things that inspired the writer to write this novel and the contemporary issues. The second part deals with the content, themes and major characters of the novel. The third part sums up the paper and at the same time leaves some questions with the reader. The present paper focuses on the major aspects of the novel.

Introduction to the Novel

A regional novel is a novel, which deals with the physical features, people's life, customs, habits, manners, traditions, language, etc., of a particular locality but regionalism does not mean the factual reporting or photographic reproduction. The regional artist emphasises the unique features of a particular locality but his creative imagination enables him to rise from the particular and local to the general and universal. The selected region becomes the symbol of the world at large, a microcosm which reflects the great world beyond.

It is a social novel, representing the hardship suffered by working class, and is written to incite the reader to radical political action. Percy Munn is a young lawyer who is the main character in the novel. He is involved in a fictionalized version of the Black Patch Tobacco Wars. It shows how the writer treats a historical event with tragic irony, emphasizes violence, and portrays individuals or human conflicts, who are caught in moral quandaries.

UNIQUENESS OF THE NOVEL

The Night Rider is marked with much distinctive qualities. It has everything means the colour, dramatic qualities, human feelings feeling, substance to enjoy the work. It's a new attempt by the writer which is also new to American fiction. It has number of striking characters. It has the expected technical competence of Mr Warren, and the poetic sense and sympathy. With a good balance, one can definitely agree that the writer has given the completeness to the novel.

BACKGROUND OF THE NOVEL

We have read about the tobacco war in our history books though its not seriously taken up by us, it was indeed a serious affair while it lasted. In 1905 various planters in Southwestern Kentucky and in other parts associations were formed to force the tobacco trust to pay them better prices for their crop. They thought that by organising and combining they could keep enough of the crop off the market and they can compel the trust to give good price for their crop and in the meanwhile they thought of borrowing money from local banks on the security of the tobacco they had stored in warehouses of their own. It is true that in the 1906 the Kentucky Legislature passed a law and legalised such combinations when the tobacco prices actually began to go up. But the effectiveness of such law depends upon the degree of organization. The law

would operate the more efficiently, if there would have been much pressure behind it, and without a minimum pressure it wouldn't operate at all. In the case of the Kentucky tobacco associations also the same thing was evident. Some of the growers would not lend their support. Either they sold their crop in the open market or, they sold surreptitiously having signed the general agreement with the companies.

The result of the condition was that, vigilante bands were formed. Their main intension was to put the fear of God in the hearts of the growers and backsliders. For several years masked men roamed in the streets at night, sometimes in groups of hundreds, destroying tobacco plant beds and burning homes and warehouses. After a great irrecoverable loss the Governor called out the militia and certain counties were placed under the martial law. Mr Warren's took this and formed the background for his widely read novel.

ANALYSIS OF THE NOVELS

In the novel, in the town of Bardsville a group of respectable, substantial citizens headed by a Senator and an able young lawyer named Percy Munn come together to form the Association of Growers of Dark Fired Tobacco. Later this original organisation gave rise to the Free Farmers Brotherhood for Protection and Control. It had a night-riding outfit with mixed membership and few scruples. Some of the Association directors resigned when they discovered how it operates; others, among them Percy Munn, step in to try to direct and control it.

The Night Rider is essentially the story of Percy Munn. At the end of the story the main character of the novel Percy Munn takes a pistol and blows out his brains. It can be interpreted in several ways: as an account of an earnest, common young man caught up in social forces which were too great for him, as a fictional treatment of some of the historical facts, or as an analysis of what usually happens when, men try to achieve their aim by illegal methods. As Mr. Warren himself was least interested in the third point of view, his novel lacks ultimate resolution. He clearly shows how Percy Munn reacts to what he has done. Warren also shows that the reasons for that reaction have been either intentionally or unconsciously done. The complications are so well interwoven by the writer that, the reader can barely distinguish.

Percy Munn is the one who is involved variety of moral issues, but nowhere does he stand and face them; there is also the problem of his relationship with his wife, who rather unaccountably drops out of the picture. Lucille Christian, becomes his mistress, and finally that in turn is connected with his plan to commit a deliberate murder. None of these things happen to him inevitably out of Percy Munn's character itself, nor does Mr Warren do very much to explain them. He tells his story, and that is about all there is to it.

The story is in most respects handsomely and even hauntingly told, with certain remarkable scenes. Allen Tate compared the night riders descend upon the Bardsville tobacco warehouses to the work of Tolstoy. Even Willie Proudfit's long and apparently gratuitous account of hunting days out West is good. Indeed. All the parts of the Night Rider is much less than good, and if taken as a whole, they not only they add up to a perfect whole, but also mark the appearance of an imposing new talent in American fiction.

Mr Munn commits the first of a series of lawless deeds by curtailing the association activities to defend Bunk Trevelyan who is accused of murdering a neighbor. Mr Munn convinces himself that an end justifies the means to attain it. Trusting Bunk's protestations of innocence, Munn leads an illegal search of the home of an African American in the area to find a knife like the one belonging to Bunk. When a knife, which had been found at the murder scene is found, the African-American owner tells an unlikely story of how he got it. Bunk is released and the innocent man dies for the crime.

The tobacco companies raised the prices and association decided to continue to hold out to bring a public denunciation of the association by Tolliver and a suit to recover his crop. Bitter over Tolliver's betrayal, Munn joins an activist organization. The secret Ku Klux Klan-like Free Farmers' Brotherhood of Protection and Control. The bands of night riders destroyed the tobacco beds of farmers who refused to join the association. a man of both courage and probity, Captain Todd, disapproves of the new group within the old. He withdraws himself from the association. But Percy Munn inwardly defends his own action as he knows that it is lawlessness yet believes that the raids would finally bring justice to the farmers.

Percy Munn, a lawyer and gentleman farmer who dies because of his obsessive involvement with the Association of Growers of Dark Fired Tobacco and The Free Farmers' Brotherhood of Protection and Control, called the night riders. Munn sees no pattern or meaning in the events of his life, but he searches for the ultimate decisive deed that will resolve all of the life's conflicts. He anticipates that the brotherhood of the association will supply the sense of community he lacks, but instead, the night riders' activities complete his isolation from his wife, his friends, and his professional ethics. Unjustly accused of murder, Munn flees to the sanctuary of Proudfit's farm, where Proudfit's autobiographical narrative finally helps him to understand his part in the overall pattern of human history.

Willie Proudfit, a fiercely independent yeoman farmer who hides Munn from the authorities. The antithesis of Munn, Willie embodies the sweep of history: He recalls his past and plans for his future, but he lives in the present. His narrative's central themes are humans' need to feel a sense of community, to understand their finite place in the universe, to acknowledge the validity of others' conflicting visions, and to accept their role in the overall pattern of human history.

Edmund Tolliver, a defeated senator who organises, but later betrays, the association. A charismatic and ambitious man, Tolliver compensates for childhood poverty by exploiting the land and other people, all in pursuit of political power. For Tolliver, human relationships remain on the level of abstraction, and he never is truly a part of any community.

Among the dominant themes in the novels of Robert Penn Warren are the search for self-identity, the isolation of the individual in society, and the opposition of violence and order in the development of modern America. All three themes appear in Warren's *Night Rider*.

The principal action of *Night Rider* is based on events that occurred in Kentucky between the years 1905 and 1908. The growers of dark tobacco in Kentucky and Tennessee formed a protective association to combat the tobacco companies and to try to force them to pay higher prices for tobacco. When the companies countered with small increases offered to all who would sell to them, some planters turned to a violent action executed by bands of 'night riders'. This included the destruction of the plant beds of those who refused to join the fight against the companies and finally led to the dynamiting of company warehouses in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. The action of the lawless bands was finally stopped by sending troops into the area. Though most of the events in *Night Rider* are related to the battle of the tobacco planters against the companies and the farmers who refused to join or cooperate with the protective association, the book is not, as Warren warns the reader in a prefatory note, a historical novel. The tobacco war provides the framework for the story of a young lawyer, Percy Munn (Mr. Munn), and his degeneration from a man of principle to a man of violence. It is a story of self-realization that comes too late to a man who, though intelligent, lacks the will, moral strength, or clarity of vision to make the right decisions when faced by crises in his life.

As Warren’s novel reveals, these philosophical differences erupted into violence against tobacco growers who failed to cooperate with the association—a fictional event suggested by regional history. In addition to describing the events that led to the conflict known as the Black Patch War, Warren provides memorable descriptions of the physical terrain of this area, describing it as a plateau of wooded hills and arable valleys, with hardwood forests and inspiring ridge-top vistas. However, Warren also realistically depicts the region’s propensity for violence, resulting in part from its memories of the Civil War and ranging from acts of racial hatred to the barn burnings and midnight murders of the tobacco growers’ association.

Warren takes a too familiar plot. On the one hand we have Government-sanctioned big-business on the other farmers. With the rapid fall in the price of dark-leaf tobacco, debt-plagued planters of Kentucky’s ‘Black Patch’ region became desperate during the early 1900’s. The planters were seen selling the tobacco at whatever price the trust dictated as the gigantic American Tobacco Company had achieved unchallenged control over the market.

It is from here we see that, the story deviates from the script. Big farmers refused to give up. In 1904, nearly 5,000 farmers assembled in Guthrie to announce the formation of the Planter’s Protective Association. The plan was that, if the farmers united to withhold their tobacco from the market, then the Association’s collective force over the supply would counteract American Tobacco’s control of the demand. The giant commercial trust would therefore be forced to negotiate with them on an equal foothold.

The plan was indeed very attractive. The Association’s position improved, and it acquired partners among politicians and local banks. By aiming to ruin its new opponent, American Tobacco struck back. In a measure it was certain that it would provoke conflict in rural communities. So the company offered specially-overstated prices to the farmer who rejected the Association.

It was but natural that the farmers who accepted this offer were regarded by the Association’s more ardent members as associates with the enemy. In the same way that scabs are regarded by labor unionists. Later these associates began to receive unfriendly visits from the Night Riders. It was a paramilitary group of masked raiders, who destroyed and burnt down barns under cover of darkness. Publicly, the Association blamed the situation on American Tobacco and denied involvement but in reality, many leading Association men were also the members of Night Rider platoons.

The struggle became much intense, as the Riders developed into a full-fledged guerrilla army. Surprisingly, operations expanded throughout the state. A band of three hundred men stormed over towns of Hopkinsville and Perryville. The band disconnected the telegraph and telephone lines and captured the police and fire stations. Later they also destroyed all American Tobacco assets in the neighborhood. The huge warehouses were burnt with hundreds of thousands of pounds of tobacco inside. As a result the dark sky was repeatedly lit up with flashes of fire and shootouts occurred between Night Riders and local group.

Warren’s the Night Rider arouses the bombarding of inherent questions at the reader. One thinks for oneself that, Is there any voice for morality in politics? or is politics the silent disagreement of ultimate economic forces? Is free will a delusion to be driven out by the age of the machine? Does every desire, however noble, carry within it the corrupting worm of its own self-destruction?

The narrative follows the rise and fall of Perceval Munn. Munn’s existence is modernity in microcosm. His very existence is tinted in two contrasting passages. The book opens with a scene of Munn, who is riding aboard a steam

locomotive which was bound for an Association rally. When the train slows to a halt, Munn finds himself being overpowered by the crowd of his fellow-passengers. The pressure behind was because of the pressure generated by the people behind him, who wanted to move down the walkway and get off the train and get into the streets as the movement of the crowd pushed him toward the door. Mr Munn resented the pressure that was human because it was made by human beings, but that was inhuman too, because he could not segregate and charge any one of those human beings who made it.

Warren invites the reader to consider the dehumanizing, anonymising effects of modern society. To see Munn's decisions as an effort to confront the effects. As literary critic Richard Law puts it, "The episode is emblematic of the uncertain relationship between human will and the impersonal forces of history". This dream-turned-obsession or inevitable circumstances eventually make him into a Night Rider.

As a narrator Warren is peculiar. His characters are complex. He raises many issues which do not have straight forward solutions. He clearly does not approve the burning of farmers' barns or even company warehouses. But at the same time he does not pass judgement on the Night Riders either. Some charitable readers may perhaps, sympathise with Munn, who strives to be human, at least.

CONCLUSIONS/ TO SUM UP

The Night Rider confronts the simple-minded conservative perception of our time. In contrast to the talking-heads, Warren viewed intolerance as an indication of the secondary cause, and the problem is not solely economic but it is complex. Men cut off from their origins and alienated from their selves become desperate. Hence it becomes natural that the desperate men do desperate deeds. It is very commonly accepted that conventional intelligence does distinctly distinguish being uprooted as a major problem. On the contrary, our law makers and administrators call it 'liberation' or in Indian terms *Mukti* as in economic terms what we call it a development.

Conventional wisdom is also known as Enlightenment liberalism, and is inherent to the Americans. It cannot even intelligently describe human motivations for the purposes of practical real politics. Entrusting politics with a moral order is guaranteed to produce fire and ruin. On the whole if the transformation is for the good let it happen place for the common good of the community. One cannot completely neglect the conventional beliefs. Drastic change will definitely result in destruction. Human conflicts play a major role in the life of every individual. It is even in the modern era that we still find lack of sense of morality in politics. In this mechanized world, people are alienated to the world around them and man's greed has made him all the more inhuman to other humans. To re assess ourselves and to improve over it is the relevance of the study..

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